



# AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH

STRUCTURE, HISTORY, AND USE

ROUTLEDGE LINGUISTICS CLASSICS

EDITED BY SALIKOKO S. MUFWENE,  
JOHN R. RICKFORD, GUY BAILEY,  
AND JOHN BAUGH



# *African-American English*

This book was the first to provide a comprehensive survey of linguistic research into African-American English and is widely recognised as a classic in the field. It covers both the main linguistic features, in particular the grammar, phonology, and lexicon, as well as the sociological, political, and educational issues connected with African-American English.

The editors have played key roles in the development of African-American English and Black linguistics as overlapping academic fields of study. Along with other leading figures, notably Geneva Smitherman, William Labov and Walt Wolfram, they provide an authoritative diverse guide to these vitally important subject areas. Drawing on key moments of cultural significance from the Ebonics controversy to the rap of Ice-T, the contributors cover the state of the art in scholarship on African-American English, and actively dispel misconceptions, address new questions, and explore new approaches. This classic edition has a new foreword by Sonja Lanehart, setting the book in context and celebrating its influence.

This is an essential text for courses on African-American English, key reading for Varieties of English and World Englishes modules, and an important reference for students of linguistics, Black studies, and anthropology at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

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# *African-American English*

*Structure, History, and Use*

*Classic Edition*

**Edited by Salikoko S. Mufwene,  
John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey,  
and John Baugh**

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## *Foreword to the Routledge Linguistics Classics edition*

When the Oakland Ebonics Controversy emerged in late 1996, there was a dearth of books on African American language<sup>1</sup>. In that small number, there was an even smaller number of comprehensive or textbook-like books available. Most were on research studies specific to a particular area or subject. While there were certainly classics, such as Turner 1949, Wolfram 1969, Dillard 1972, Labov 1972, Smitherman 1977, and Baugh 1983, *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use* (hereafter, *AAE*; 1998) was the first post-Ebonics Controversy book that provided an introduction to AAL and was edited by a renowned group of scholars – Salikoko Mufwene, John Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh – whose programs of research were devoted to language use in African American communities. They have been invaluable mentors to me and so many other scholars in the field.

Despite everything that happened during the Oakland Ebonics Controversy, there were two good things that came from it: (1) a recognizable name that non-linguists, especially laypeople, could use that would be immediately recognized (i.e., Ebonics) and (2) the opening up of the book publishing world to books on AAL. *AAE* was one of the first and best examples of the scholarship and one I have used many times for my classes and my own scholarship.

*AAE* is divided into three sections, as the subtitle suggests: Structure, History, and Use. The first section gets right into the syntactic system of AAL. Martin and Wolfram discuss the sentence in African American Vernacular Language (AAVL), Green takes on the aspect and predicate phrases of AAVL, and Mufwene concludes with the noun phrase in AAVL. (Special shout-out to Lisa Green then and now for holding it down in the fight to convey that AAL should be studied not as if it is comprised of a group of features but, instead, has systems that need to be studied as we do in other languages.) This is a challenging section and benefits those with some background knowledge in Linguistics, but it is perfectly suitable for an undergraduate Linguistics class. What is significant and most important is the conveyance to the reader that AAL is systematic, varied, and complex. AAL is a language variety that has depth and structure more than the sum of its parts. It is not unique as far as languages go. It is not exotic or more special in some way than any other language. It is systematic, rule-governed, and varies and changes just like any other language. That ideology is at the heart of this book and one that is so necessary to convey even after all of these years of use and study. That is also why no one section of the book can be overemphasized because all of the sections work together to reinforce the complexity, breadth, and depth of AAL as well as the belief that it should be studied just like any other language variety. So, while there

are differences in AAL compared to varieties of American English or Caribbean language varieties, we can study AAL in its own right.

*AAE* stealthily enters the debate on the origins of AAL in three chapters in the second section that approach the history of AAL from different perspectives. Bailey and Thomas focus on AAVL variation in its phonology as mostly compared to Southern White vernaculars from a regional variation perspective. They take a systematic approach in analyzing a swath of AAVL phonological features for comparison across regional varieties in the United States. Labov introduces the idea of co-existing systems with an “African-American component” (AA) and an “Other American Dialects component” (OAD) in “General English” (GE) from a “consensus” perspective on the origins and development of AAL using the AA components of the tense-aspect system. Rickford closes out the section by making a case for creole origins of AAVL using zero copula. I want to give Rickford a shoutout for his passion for and scholarship on substantiating the connection between the origins of AAL as inextricably linked to the origins of the people. No scholar has contributed more in this area than John Rickford. I have expressed my views elsewhere about the Anglicist vs. Creolist Hypotheses and debate (see Lanehart 2007), but I find this section one that provides substantive scholarship for further critical thought on the matter.

I have used this section of the book most extensively. The breakdown of the phonology of AAVL by Bailey and Thomas is invaluable to AAL research. I have used their understanding of AAL and the South often. I value Labov’s chapter on co-existent systems in AAVL because of how it attempts to define AAVL at its core and its relationship to American English based on the tense-aspect system of AAVL. Though his “current consensus” perspective did not abrogate the controversy about the origins, history, and development of AAL, I do believe it provided a regrouping from the heated debate at the time. This chapter continues to help me reanalyze and critique this very large issue in AAL research and how it helps to demonstrate the importance of researcher subjectivities, ideologies, and epistemologies. I also think this section of chapters helps scholars think about the history, origins, and development of AAL in a more expansive way than the historical binary of Anglicist vs. Creolist. And though this section is labeled as “History,” it does use and engage grammatical arguments and data that benefit those having prior linguistic knowledge – but it is still suitable for undergraduate classes.

While I value all of *AAE*, my bias is toward the third section of the book, “Use,” not only because I am all about context, but also because it is the section that contains the incomparable Dr. G. (i.e., Geneva Smitherman), the Mother of AAL research. Dr. G. is a primary reason I do what I do because she has been keepin it real and holdin it

down for so many Black language, linguistics, and cultural scholars. Her *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977) has long been the AAL bible. So, when the Mother speaks, we listen. And I am glad to see her included in this Linguistics book because she does not always get the credit or recognition she deserves in Linguistics and from Linguists beyond AAL researchers. That makes *AAE* even more special for acknowledging the GOAT (Greatest of All Time). Dr. G. does not disappoint. Her chapter focuses on her work on AAVL lexicon and follows her wonderful 1994 AAL dictionary, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Spears follows with a wonderful chapter on AAL, ideology, and obscenity that was a wakeup call for a Black Southern girl brought up in the Traditional Black Baptist Church and respectability politics like me. This chapter resonated with me so much that I invited “Uncle” Arthur to continue the conversation in a collection I edited a couple of years after *AAE* (see Spears 2001). In fact, this book had such an impact on me that I invited all of these authors to contribute to that edited collection (Lanehart 2001).

Morgan’s chapter on AAL discourse was instrumental in substantiating my belief that AAL is more than linguistic features, verbal utterances, and grammar. That is, AAL includes linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of its language variety that is “more than a mood or an attitude.” Her work and that of Smitherman and Spears helped to solidify that, at least for me, studying AAL is personal, not business – and certainly not business as usual. Baugh’s final chapter brings this home by providing his scholarship on the everyday reality of being an African American and using AAL in the United States and the impact it has in the educational system, policies, and pedagogy. This work is larger than grammar and discourse. That should be even more clear in 2021 after Freedom Summer of 2020 and the visible and invisible inequities in everything involving African Americans in the United States of America.

These are the reasons why *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use* is a classic. I am indebted to the editors, the authors, and the work that keeps us marching toward JEDI – justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion – in the long arc moving toward a moral universe that we have to work for – every.single.day.

Thank you, my dear friends and mentors, Sali, John R., Guy, John B., Dr. G., Uncle Arthur, Walt; my LinguistaSistas, Lisa and Marcyliena; and my friend and peer, Erik. Much love for doing the work.

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## Note

- 1 “African American Language” is my preferred term for language use in African American communities so it is what I will use throughout. For more information and explanation, see Lanehart and Malik (2015).

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## Introduction

*Salikoko S. Mufwene and John R. Rickford*

For more than a quarter of a century, there has been no textbook on African-American vernacular English (AAVE) that represents the state of the art or is comprehensive enough to cover more than a few features traditionally associated with this vernacular, such as consonant cluster reduction, the absence of the copula, invariant or habitual *be*, time reference markers, and multiple negation. So this book should fill a need which has long been felt among linguists interested in this distinctive variety of American English. Education problems in the American public school systems have also underscored the need for educators and other citizens to have a reference work which can help them become better informed about AAVE's structural features, its history and lexicon, its use in discourse, and its relevance to the educational problems of African-American school children. The fury of polemics in the United States following the Oakland School Board's decision in December 1996 to make its teachers sensitive to the vernacular of African-American students has made it even more compelling to produce this kind of book. Although it does include analyses at a fairly technical and sophisticated level, much of this volume should remain accessible to teachers who have not had a class on AAVE. They should be able to turn to it to understand the systematic nature of AAVE, and the problems faced by a large proportion of African-American students in acquiring Standard English (SE).

This book responds to the twin demands of linguists and educators. We thought that a joint project, drawing on the strengths of many scholars, would come closest to satisfying the diverse interests of various instructors and students of AAVE. We have approached the project not only by discussing aspects of this vernacular which distinguish it from other varieties of English, but also by highlighting many aspects which it shares with some of them. This approach should help to dispel the misperception that AAVE consists only of divergences from other varieties of English spoken in North America, especially SE. At the same time, most of the chapters are written in such a way that the particular subsystem of AAVE that they cover will help readers realize that this vernacular has its own rules and regularities, like other living language varieties.

While contributors to this book extend the discussion of topics like AAVE's morphosyntax and history, which have been the foci of AAVE research for decades, they also broach others such as AAVE's phonology, lexicon, and pragmatics, which have received little or no attention in the linguistics literature, especially in recent years. It is hoped that this broadening of the scope of AAVE research will help to set the research agenda for the future. After all, if this vernacular is structurally self-contained, despite what it shares with other Englishes, there should be many more topics worthy of linguistic analysis than the few which the scholarship has covered to date.

## Part I: Structure

We begin with "structure" partly because AAVE's grammatical features most clearly demonstrate that it is a structured and systematic variety, not the random or careless speech which many mistakenly assume it to be.

For years, the classic study of the structural features of AAVE was Fasold and Wolfram's (1970) article "Some linguistic features of Negro dialect," so it is fitting that Wolfram is also co-author of the updated survey of AAVE sentence structure in this volume. Stefan Martin and Walt Wolfram's "The sentence in African-American vernacular English" draws on recent Government Binding Theory to explicate what AAVE shares structurally with other varieties of English and where those typological similarities end. Their observation that surface differences often mask underlying similarities, while surface similarities often mask deeper differences, is a sobering thought to those who jump to facile comparisons. In addition to drawing our attention to classic AAVE features like multiple negation and negative inversion, they shed light on question formation, relative clauses, and double modals. Their data also raise interesting questions for other students of English syntax (after all, AAVE is a form of English!), such as: What are the necessary conditions for identifying a particular morpheme as a complementizer?

Lisa Green's "Aspect and predicate phrases in African-American vernacular English," like other chapters in this section, enriches the book by analyzing more than the kinds of structures that have typically been discussed in the literature and by relating the topics to current interests in theoretical syntax. Beginning with paradigms of verb forms which permit systematic comparison with other English varieties, Green highlights similarities and differences between AAVE and SE verb phrases, focusing on finite auxiliaries as well as on markers of tense and aspect like *be* and *BIN* which are legendary in the literature on AAVE. She starts

with a primer for studying the verb phrase and gradually explores what may be identified as peculiarities of AAVE, articulating the meanings of aspectual auxiliaries. Readers of this chapter may want to explore further the question of what criteria make a particular item an auxiliary verb, a question which arises from a comparison of the facts she covers with those typically discussed in the syntax literature.

While Green extends the Martin and Wolfram overview of AAVE syntax by refining our view of the verb phrase, Salikoko Mufwene extends it by refining our view of the noun phrase. His chapter “The structure of the noun phrase in African-American vernacular English” is written in much the same style as are the preceding chapters on syntax, covering several aspects of this syntactic category. Among the topics he discusses are: What does the noun phrase consist of in AAVE? What are the strategies used in this vernacular to mark *plural* and *possession*? How is the distinction between *individuated* and *non-individuated* noun phrases expressed? How are relative clauses formed? Like other chapters in the volume, Mufwene’s contribution covers both subsystems peculiar to AAVE and those that it shares with other varieties of English.

## Part II: History

Forming a natural bridge between “structure” and “history” is Guy Bailey and Erik Thomas’ chapter “Some aspects of African-American vernacular English phonology.” The phonology of a language is of course an important part of the structure of any language, but the historical implications of Bailey and Thomas’ study also make it relevant to the second, historical part of this volume. Since phonology has been such a neglected aspect of linguistic scholarship on AAVE in recent years, this chapter is particularly welcome. On the descriptive level, it covers a wide range of the vernacular’s segmental features, distinguishing between those that are shared with most English varieties (including SE), those that are shared with other non-standard varieties (including Southern White speech), and those that are apparently unique to AAVE. The exposition is supplemented with revealing acoustic plots of the vowel systems of various individuals, Black and White. The chapter also has a significant historical overtone: the authors suggest when particular features may have emerged in the evolution of this variety, as they note which vowel features are suggestive of earlier creole connections and which are suggestive of twentieth-century innovation. Phonological features are rarely invoked in discussions of the creole origins of AAVE,

and Bailey and Thomas' chapter will, we hope, help to reverse this trend and shed more light on this complex issue.

In his "Co-existent systems in African-American vernacular English" William Labov both widens the range of data on time reference and attempts to interpret these facts in terms of co-existent systems, each of which accounts for part of the data but not all. A general American-English system and a system more specific to AAVE are shown to co-exist with each other, an approach which makes it possible to highlight ways in which AAVE may be related, at least typologically, to Atlantic English creoles, while it shares part of its structures with other North American varieties of English. At the heart of Labov's chapter is his discussion of the "semantic efflorescence" of AAVE, represented by its significant, and apparently evolving, tense aspect markers, including *be*, *done*, *be done*, and stressed *BIN*. What places this chapter in the historical section of this book is its incidental discussion of the creole origins hypothesis, and its more detailed claim that these and other markers are "creations of the twentieth century." This is a controversial claim, which, like Labov's earlier suggestions that AAVE is currently diverging from other American vernaculars rather than converging with them, is likely to provoke considerable discussion.

John R. Rickford surveys a central historical question in the literature on AAVE in his chapter "The creole origins of African-American vernacular English: Evidence from copula absence." He begins by explaining what it means to suggest that AAVE might have had creole influences or origins, and then identifies in detail the kinds of evidence that might be brought to bear on the issue. He then proceeds to examine quantitative evidence on copula absence – the most thoroughly studied feature of AAVE – from historical attestations, diaspora recordings, creole similarities, African language similarities, and English dialect differences, as these bear on the larger issue of prior creolization in AAVE. Although he concludes that "there is enough evidence in these data to suggest that AAVE did have some creole roots," he finds the data more complex and ambiguous than others have assumed, and he identifies several research questions that merit further investigation.

### **Part III: Use**

This section begins with two chapters on the lexicon of AAVE, an area which has been severely neglected in our scholarship, but one which is often the subject of overt comment and discussion by native speakers and by members of the general public.

Geneva Smitherman's "Word from the hood: The lexicon of African-American vernacular English" makes the important point that a distinctive AAVE lexicon cuts across social boundaries of all kinds within the African-American community, including sex, age, religion, social class, and region. While some elements certainly come from the domain of rap and hip hop, many AAVE words have arisen since the times of slavery, and the lexicon as a whole best captures the "commonality" of the African-American community. Among the subtopics which Smitherman covers are the evolution of terms for the race itself (from *African* to *Colored* to *negro* to *Negro* to *Black* to *African American*), and "cross over[s]" of words from the AAVE lexicon into varieties spoken by other Americans and peoples around the world – some of these have been co-opted for use in corporate advertising.

Arthur Spears' "African-American language use: Ideology and so-called obscenity" is a daring chapter, as it takes up the scholarly analysis of uncensored speech which some find obscene or offensive. The very length of its introductory section highlights the sensitive nature of the material, as the author attempts to forewarn readers who might be offended and as he emphasizes that the words he discusses are not representative of his own speech or attitudes; they are nonetheless ones he hears daily. We too need to remind readers that the words Spears considers are used by some, but not all, speakers of AAVE. The two expressions on which he focuses are *-ass* words, such as *bitch-ass* and *jive-ass*, and the use of *nigga* (the "*N* word"). In both cases, he reveals regularities and provides insights about their grammar and use which might otherwise have been unnoticed, and in his conclusion he relates his discussion to larger issues concerning language evaluation and censorship. One of his main points is that different attitudes towards words of this type reveal class differences within the African-American community (this is the rupture side of the commonality Smitherman stresses), and betray the double-edged nature of African-American consciousness in the United States.

Marcyliena Morgan's "More than a mood or an attitude: Discourse and verbal genres in African-American culture" covers a range of discourse and verbal genres used within the African-American community, including *signifying*, *playing the dozens*, *instigating*, *reading a person*, *reading dialect*, and *he-said-she-said* disputes. The discussion includes considerations of the kinds of *face* individuals try to project, the role of audience and interaction, and the kinds of indirect and direct speech which are cultivated and evaluated within the community. One virtue

of Morgan's analysis is that it dispels the misconception, common in the early literature, that distinctive African-American speech events are the exclusive province of adolescent males. Not only does she skillfully distinguish between adolescent and adult usage, but she also draws most of her examples from the usage of African-American women, indicating which verbal strategies differ along gender lines.

The final chapter in this section is John Baugh's "Linguistics, education, and the law: Educational reform for African-American language minority students," which is particularly relevant to Oakland's Ebonics proposal of 1996 and the fallout it provoked. One might wonder why it appears in this section, since it has to do with neither pragmatics nor vocabulary, the customary provinces of "use" and "usage." However, it does involve "use" in a larger sense, the use which educators and policy makers might make of the information about the systematic nature of AAVE provided in this book, and by linguists more generally. Among other things, Baugh distinguishes between the kinds of financial and educational assistance provided by Title I (students in poverty), Title VII (Limited English Proficiency students requiring bilingual education or English as a Second Language), and Special Education (cognitive and physical limitations) programs. He argues that speakers of AAVE, who are native speakers of English, but of a vernacular rather than standard variety, fall between the legal and educational cracks. He proposes a set of alternative categories and measures to remedy the situation.

## **Final remarks**

Overall, the chapters of this book reflect more or less the state of current scholarship on AAVE. However, they do not simply summarize the state of the art. They also address new questions, explore new approaches, and sometimes apply current analytical frameworks in novel ways. The interest in matters of linguistic theory which some authors display has not eclipsed the primary interest of this book in disseminating facts about AAVE and the varying interpretations which different scholars have made of them. The chapters show that the same facts may be approached in more than one way. In fact, they indirectly invite the reader to take the same facts and try to approach them differently, to see whether we may understand them in ways that will shed new light on how language works. AAVE is relevant to the development of more than quantitative sociolinguistics, and it is as relevant to the development of theories of language structure and change as SE is.

Some chapters overlap in this book, especially Smitherman's, Spears', and Morgan's, as well as Green's, Labov's, and Martin and Wolfram's. They do not, however, merely repeat each other. We thought readers should benefit from their complementarity. The lack of consensus on some issues must be interpreted positively as reflecting limitations on what we know, which is true in almost all aspects of science qua quest for knowledge of reality around us. Again, we hope that readers consider this book an invitation to conduct their own research on aspects of AAVE of interest to them and to contribute to our ongoing understanding of this important variety.

The organization of the chapters is not intended to suggest any particular order in which topics must be read and discussed in a class on AAVE, nor to suggest any particular scale of importance. The chapters are typically self-contained, although knowledge of what was being written by other contributors has influenced what individual authors felt relevant to discuss, in order to reduce redundancies. Users of this book should thus feel free to start reading the book with any chapter that interests them. However, where topics have been identified by their grouping into sections as related, readers may benefit more from reading the essays in the order in which they are presented.

Some chapters will be most accessible to advanced college students who have had some linguistics, but not necessarily a lot. Where students have had no or little linguistics training, we hope that their teachers have, and that they can explain to the class what they should know in order to derive maximum benefit from the chapters. A useful strategy used by some of us has been to present and discuss relevant data first, before referring students to technical analyses and detailed references. Such introductory sessions may help some students understand the chapters better and lead them to participate more successfully in more advanced discussions. Of course, there are also several chapters, particularly those in the final section, which are fully accessible to readers with no, or little, linguistic background.

Finally, we hope that this book will interest its readers not only in AAVE but also, and more generally, in non-standard vernaculars. Except perhaps for work done in the research paradigm of quantitative sociolinguistics, our knowledge of the structures and other aspects of such varieties lags behind what is known about Standard English. Yet all English varieties should contribute to the development of theories of English, just as all languages should bear on hypotheses about Language. May this book be considered a modest step in this direction.





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## The creole origins of African-American vernacular English: Evidence from copula absence

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